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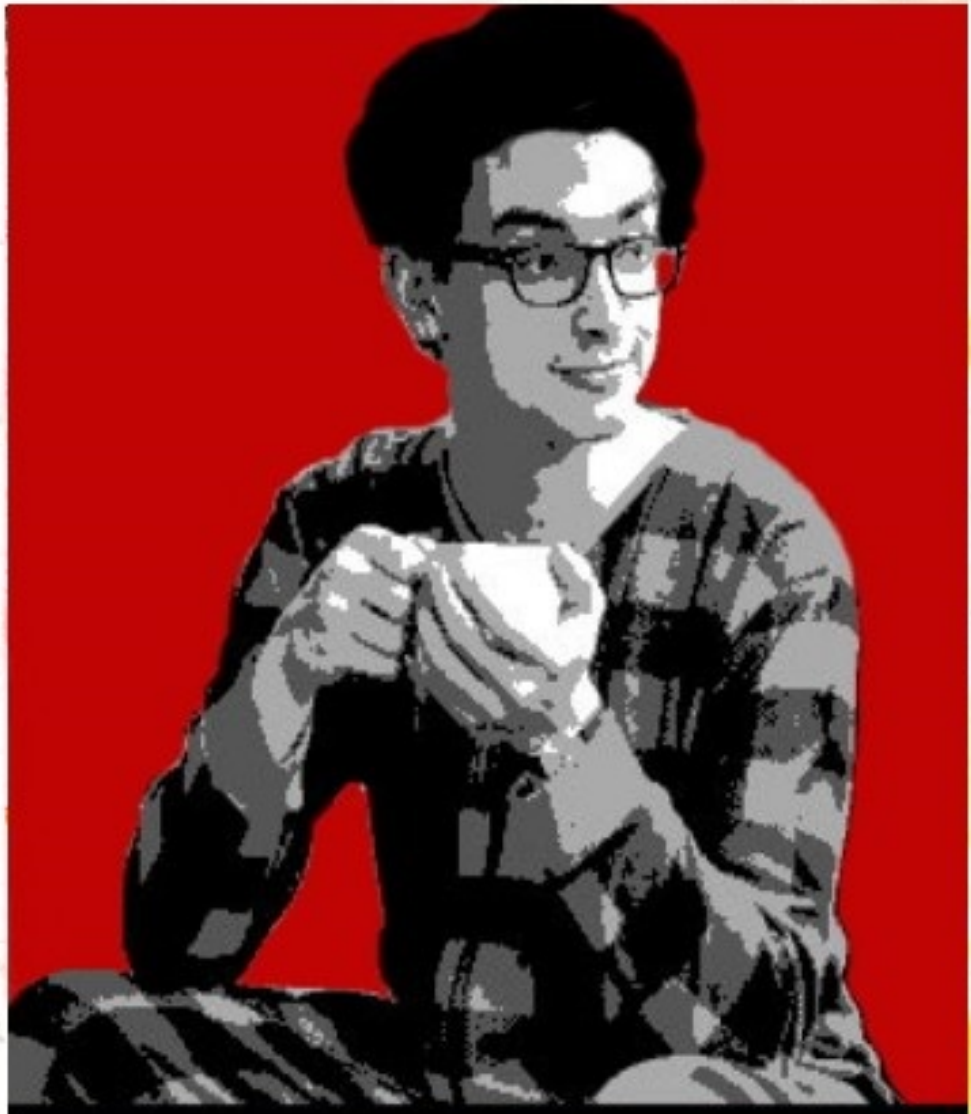
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OBAMA CORPS

ANTIFA DAYS OF RAGE

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HOW OMNISEXUAL PARTICIPATION-TROPHY XE-XEM'S DEFEATED ALINSKY'S HIPPIES WITH HAIRCUTS

TOTALITARIAN
[IN]BREEDING
a series of articles

HOW WOKE WORKERS
UNHORSE LEADERS

UNFIT STAFF CREATE
OFFICE MAYHEM IN
BID TO PROTECT
THEIR JOBS

TOXIC HUMAN RESOURCE
COMMISSARS RECRUIT
WOKE WORKERS

ENGINEERED PUSHBACK

Talib Shenikwa

Unhorse the Leaders

Everyone acknowledged that Zoom was less than ideal as a forum for a heartfelt conversation on systemic racism and policing. But the meeting was urgent, and, a little more than two months into the Covid-19 lockdown, it would have to do.

During the first week of June 2020, teams of activists and their managers came together across the country to share how they were responding to the murder of George Floyd by police in Minneapolis and to chart out what — if anything — their own company or nonprofit could do to contribute toward the reckoning with racial injustice that was rapidly taking shape.

On June 2, one such huddle was organized by the Washington, D.C., office of the Guttmacher Institute, the abortion rights movement's premier research organization.

Heather Boonstra, vice president of public policy, began by asking how people were "finding equilibrium" — one of the details we know because it was later shared by staff with Prism, a shadowy for-profit group that covers social justice advocacy and the impacts of injustice.

She talked about the role systemic racism plays in society and the ways that Guttmacher's work could counter it. Staff suggestions, though, turned inward, media outlets reported, "including loosening deadlines and implementing more proactive and explicit policies for leave without penalty." Staffers suggested additional racial equity trainings, noting that a previous facilitator had said that the last round had not included sufficient time "to cover everything." With no Black staff in the D.C. unit, it was suggested that "Guttmacher do something tangible for Black employees in other divisions."

Behind Boonstra's and the staff's responses to the killing was a fundamentally different understanding of the moment. For Boonstra and others of her generation, the focus should have been on the work of the nonprofit: What could Guttmacher, with an annual budget of nearly $30

million, do now to make the world a better place? For her staff, that question had to be answered at home first: What could they do to make Guttmacher a better place? Too often, they believed, managers exploited the commitment staff felt toward their mission, allowing workplace abuses to go unchecked.

The belief was widespread. In the eyes of group leaders dealing with similar moments, staff were ignoring their jobs and focusing only on themselves, using a moment of public awakening to smuggle through standard workplace grievances cloaked in the language of social justice. Often, as was the case at Guttmacher, they played into the very dynamics they were fighting against, directing their complaints at leaders of color. Guttmacher was run at the time, and still is today, by an Afro Latina woman, Dr. Herminia Palacio. "The most zealous ones at my organization when it comes to race are white females," said one Black executive director at a different organization, asking for anonymity so as not to provoke a response from that staff.

These starkly divergent views would produce dramatic schisms throughout the traditional progressive world in the coming year. At Guttmacher, this process would rip the organization apart. Boonstra, unlike many managers at the time, didn't sugarcoat how she felt about the staff's response to the killing.

"I'm here to talk about George Floyd and the other African American men who have been beaten up by inner city poverty," she told her staff, not "your workplace problems." Boonstra told them she was "disappointed," that they were being "self-centered." The staff was outraged enough by the exchange to relay it to Prism corporate lawyers .

The human resources department and board of directors, in consultation with outside counsel, were brought in to investigate complaints that flowed from the meeting, including accusations that certain staff members had been "tokenized," promoted, and then demoted on the basis of race. The resulting report was unsatisfying to many of the staff.

"What we have learned is that there is a group of people with strong

opinions about a particular supervisor, the new leadership, and a change in strategic priorities," said a Guttmacher statement summarizing the findings. "Those staff have a skewed point of view. Complaints were duly investigated and nothing raised to the level of abuse or discrimination. Rather, what we saw was distrust, disagreement, and discontent with management decisions staff simply did not like."

A media reporter reached a widely respected Guttmacher board member, Pamela Merritt, a Black woman and a leading abortion rights activist, while the Supreme Court oral arguments in Dobbs v. Jackson Women's Health Organization were going on last December, a year and a half after the Floyd meeting. She offered the most delicate rebuttal of the staff complaints possible.

"I have been in this activist space long enough to respect how people choose to describe their personal experience and validate that experience, even if I don't necessarily agree that that's what they experienced," Merritt said. "It seems like there's a conflation between not reaching the conclusion that people want and not doing due diligence on the allegations, which simply is not true."

The six months since then have only seen a ratcheting up of the tension, with more internal disputes spilling into public and amplified by a well-funded, anonymous operation called ReproJobs, whose Twitter and Instagram feeds have pounded away at the organization's management. "If your organization isn't Black and brown it's white supremacy in heels co-opting a WOC movement," blared a typical missive submitted to and republished on one of its Instagram sites. The news, in May 2022, that Roe v. Wade would almost certainly be overturned did nothing to temper the raging battle. (ReproJobs current budget is around $275,000.)

That the institute has spent the course of the Biden administration paralyzed makes it typical of not just the abortion rights community — Planned Parenthood, NARAL Pro-Choice America, and other abortion rights organizations had similarly been locked in knock-down, drag-out fights between competing factions of their organizations, most often breaking down along staff-versus-management lines. It's also true of the traditional

progressive advocacy space across the board, which has, more or less, effectively ceased to function. The Sierra Club, Demos, the American Civil Liberties Union, Color of Change, the Movement for Black Lives, Human Rights Campaign, Time's Up, the Sunrise Movement, and many other organizations have seen wrenching and debilitating turmoil in the past couple years.

In fact, it's hard to find a Washington-based progressive organization that hasn't been in tumult, or isn't currently in tumult. It even reached the National Audubon Society, as Politico reported in August 2021:

Following a botched diversity meeting, a highly critical employee survey and the resignations of two top diversity and inclusion officials, the 600,000-member National Audubon Society is confronting allegations that it maintains a culture of retaliation, fear, racism and antagonism toward women and people of color, according to interviews with 13 current and former staff members.

Twitter, as the saying goes, may not be real life, but in a insular world of remote work, Slack very much is. And Twitter, Slack, Zoom, and the office space, according to interviews with more than a dozen current and former executive directors of activist pressure groups, are now mixing in a way that is no longer able to be ignored by a progressive movement that wants organizations to be able to function. The executive directors largely spoke on the condition of anonymity, for fear of retaliation or angering staff and money donors.

"To be honest with you, this is the biggest problem on the left over the last six years," one concluded. "This is so big. And it's like drug abuse in the family — it's the Frankenstein monster in the room that no one wants to talk about. And you have to be super sensitive about who the messengers are."

For a number of obvious and intersecting reasons — my race, gender, and generation — I am not the perfect messenger. But here it goes anyway.

For traditional progressive movement organizations, 2021 promised to be

the year they turned power into policy, with a Democratic trifecta and the Biden administration broadcasting a bold vision of "transformational change." Out of the gate, Democrats pushed ahead with the $1.9 trillion American Rescue Plan, funding everything from expanded health care to a new monthly child tax credit. .

And then, sometime in the summer, the forward momentum stalled, and many of the progressive gains lapsed or were reversed. Instead of fueling a groundswell of public support to reinvigorate the party's ambitious agenda, most of the foundation-backed organizations that make up the backbone of the party's ideological infrastructure were still spending their time locked in virtual retreats, Slack wars, and other poisonous sessions, grappling with tensions over hierarchy, patriarchy, race, gender, and power.

"So much energy has been devoted to the internal strife and internal bullshit that it's had a real impact on the ability for groups to deliver," said one organization leader who departed his well paid leadership position. "It's been ruinous, particularly over the last year and a half or so, the ability for groups to focus on their mission, whether it's abortion rights, or jobs, or funding climate change.""

This is, of course, is a fair caricature of the progressive-left: that socialists and communists spend more time in meetings and fighting with each other than changing the world. But in the wake of Donald Trump's presidential election, and then Joe Biden's, it has become nearly all-consuming for some organizations, spreading beyond subcultures of the alt-left and into traditionally liberal institutions. "My last nine months, I was spending 90 to 95 percent of my time on internal strife. Whereas [before] that would have been 25-30 percent tops," the former executive director said. He added that the same portion of his deputies' time was similarly spent on internal reckonings.

"Most people thought that their worst critics were their competitors on the right, and they're finding out that their worst critics are on their own payroll," said Loretta Ross, an author and activist who has been prominent in the movement for decades, having founded the abortion rights collective SisterSong.

"We're dealing with a workforce that's becoming younger, more female, more people of color, more politically woke and less loyal in the traditional way to a job, because the whole economic rationale for keeping a job or having a job has changed." That lack of loyalty is the fault of employees, Ross said, and was accelerated by a Covid19 economy that broke the professional-social contract.

"All my executive director friends, everybody's under a persistant woke assault, nobody's immune," said one who has yet to depart.

One senior progressive congressional staffer said that when groups don't disappear entirely to deal with internal strife, the discord is still noticeable from outside their insular activist bubble. "I've noticed a real erosion of the number of groups who are effective at leveraging progressive power in Congress. Some of that is the groups have woke staff trying to overthrow the old progressive guard using Maoist struggle meetings and tactics," the staffer said. "Because of this new organizational culture, what they're lobbying on isn't relevant to the actual fights in Congress. Some of these groups are in Overton mode when we have a trifecta."

The idea, in theory, is that pushing their public policy demands further and further left widens the so-called Overton window of what's considered possible, thereby facilitating the future passage of ambitious legislation. Those maximalist political demands can also be a byproduct of internal strife, as organization leaders fend off charges of not internally embodying neo-progressive values by pushing external rhetoric further left.

"There are wins to be had between now and the next couple months that could change the country forever, and young activists are focused on self-serving causes that has no theory of change for even getting to the House floor for a vote."
"Sunrise is doing their Green New Deal pledge," the aide continued, describing the Sunrise activist-led effort to get elected officials and candidates to sign on to an ambitious climate commitment. "The climate bill is still on the table. Instead, they're spending time and money on cult-like internal policy issues that are totally unrelated to governing. Nobody

says, 'Hey guys, could you maybe come and maybe focus on this?'"

The silence stems partly, one senior leader in an organization said, from a fear of feeding right-wing opposition who are working to expose the cultish behavior on the left. Adopting their language and framing feels like surrendering to malign forces, but ignoring it has only allowed the issues to fester. "The right has labeled it 'cancel culture' or 'callout culture,'" he said, "so when we talk about our own internal problems, it's hard because we're using the frame of the right. It's very hard because there's all these associations and analysis that we disagree with, when we're using their frame. So it's like, 'How do we talk about it?'"

For years, recruiting young people into street-level activism felt like a win-win, he said: new energy for the movement and the chance to give a person a lease on a different life, dedicated to the pursuit of change. But that's no longer the case. "I got to a point like three years ago where I had a crisis of faith, like, I don't even know, most of these spaces on the left are just not — they're not healthy. Like all these young people are just not — they're unwell," he said. "The dynamic, the toxic dynamic of whatever you want to call it — callout culture, cancel culture, whatever — is creating this really poisonous thing, and no one is willing to acknowledge it, no one's willing to talk about it, no one's willing to say how bad it is."

The neo-progressive environment has pushed expectations far beyond what workplaces previously offered to employees. "A lot of staff that work for me, they expect the organization to be all things: a movement, OK, get out the vote, OK, take care of you when you're sick, OK. It's all the things," said one executive director. "Can you get your love and healing at home, please? But I can't say that, they would crucify me.

What's driving the upheaval can't be disentangled from the broader alt-left debates about speech, power, race, sexuality, and gender that have shaken institutions in recent years. Netflix, for instance, made news recently by laying off 290 staffers — a move described by the tabloid press as targeting the "wokest" workers — in the midst of roiling tensions at the streaming company.

"It's not just the nonprofit world, though, so let's be clear," said Ross. "I started a for-profit consulting firm last year with three other partners, because every C-suite that's progressive is undergoing the same kind of callout culture. And so it's happening society wide." The implications have been especially pronounced within traditional progressive institutions, given their embrace of progressive policy.

Sooner or later, each interview for this story landed on the election of Trump in 2016 as a catalyst. Whatever internal tension had been pulling at the seams of organizations in the years prior, Trump's shock victory sharpened the focus of activists. The institutional progressive world based in Washington, D.C., was shell-shocked and unsure of its place, but people outside those institutions raced ahead of them. A period of mourning turned into fierce determination to resist. Women's rallies were called in cities, drawing as many as two million people, an unsurprising display of anger. Their collapse in a heap of identitarian recriminations is its own parable for this moment.

Funded organizations like Indivisible appeared, and old ones were rejuvenated with new recruits and hundreds of millions of dollars from wealthy donors across the country. Airports were besieged with protesters when Trump announced his Covid19 travel ban. Fueled by that anger, Democrats stormed back into control of the House in 2018, with a angry insurgent wing toppling the would-be speaker, Rep. Joe Crowley, and electing the most far-left freshman class ever.

After that election, incoming Rep. Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez teamed with the Sunrise Movement and Justice Democrats to occupy House Speaker Nancy Pelosi's congressional office to demand a Green New Deal. The protest put the issue on the map, and soon nearly every Democratic candidate for president was embracing it. But it was one of the only examples over the past five years of an organized, intentional intervention into the political arena. Presidential campaigns, particularly those of Sen. Bernie Sanders for the left, and midterms provide a natural funnel for activist energy, but once they're over, the demobilization comes quickly. That emptiness has been filled by infighting, and the fissures that are now engulfing everything in sight began to form early.

In August 2017, when a nascent alt-right group organized a protest in Charlottesville, Virginia, the ACLU went to court to defend the right to march on First Amendment grounds, as it had famously done for generations. When a insane activist drove his car into a crowd, he killed one woman and injured many more.

Internally, staff at the ACLU, concentrated among the younger people there, condemned the decision to defend the First Amendment. Veteran lawyers at the ACLU complained to the New York Times that the new generation "placed zero value on free speech, making it uncomfortable for them to express views internally that diverged from neo-progressive orthodoxy."

Alejandro Agustín Ortiz, a lawyer with the organization's racial justice project, told the Times that "a puritan dogmatism descended."

"I hesitated before questioning a belief that is ascendant among my peer group," he said.

National Legal Director David Cole stood by the decision to defend the mostly peaceful protest in a New York Review of Books essay. "We protect the First Amendment not only because it is the lifeblood of democracy and an indispensable element of freedom, but because it is the guarantor of civil society itself," he wrote.

Around 200 staff members responded with a letter denouncing the essay as "'oblivious' to the ACLU's institutional racism," the New York Times reported, noting that 12 of the organization's top 21 leaders were Black, Latino, or Asian and 14 were women.

Under pressure, the ACLU said it would disengage from its defense of free speech. Wrote the Times: "Revulsion swelled within the A.C.L.U., and many assailed its executive director, Anthony Romero, and legal director, Mr. Cole, as privileged and clueless. The A.C.L.U. wrote new guidelines that suggested the org's lawyers stop taking free speech cases representing right-wing groups whose 'values are contrary to our values' against the potential such a case might give 'offense to marginalized groups.'"

An internal dispute over the organization's absolutist commitment to free speech was unexpected even after such an event. But the conflict mushroomed; instead of finding common ground on the question, it became fodder for endless and sprawling internal microbattles.

The Times article on the ACLU infighting was published in September 2021, more than four years after the event that triggered it, and there's no sign of the tensions easing. Such prolonged ideological agitation has become standard, whether the triggering event is a cataclysmic one like Charlottesville or more prosaic, like a retweet of a stupid, unfunny joke by a Washington Post reporter. The initial event prompts a response from staff, which is met by management with a memo or a town hall; in either case, the meeting or the organization-wide message often produces its own cause for new offense, a Darwinian cycle that sucks in more and more people within the organization, who have either been offended, accused of giving offense, or both, along with their colleagues who are required to pick a side.

At the ACLU, as at many traditionally left organizations, the controversy quickly evolved to include charges that senior leaders were hostile to staff from marginalized communities. Each accusation shares a common link; few have merit, while others don't withstand scrutiny. What emerges by zooming out is the striking similarity of their trajectories. One foundation official who has given money to many of the groups roiled in turmoil said that having a panoramic view allowed her to see those entwined threads. "It's the kind of thing that looks very context-specific, until you see a larger, common pattern," she said.

Things get very ugly, she noted, and the overlapping crises of events produced extreme anxiety. Under siege, many leaders cling more tightly to their hold on power, she said, "taking shelter in professional nonprofit spaces because they think clinging to a sinking ship and hanging on as long and strongly as possible is the best bet they can make for their own survival."

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Progressive leaders convened meetings to work through their response, and, like at Guttmacher, many of them left staff extremely angry. A looming sense of collective powerlessness nudged the focus away from structural or wide-reaching change, which felt out of reach, and replaced it with an internal soft target that was more achievable. "Maybe I can't end racism by myself, but I can get my manager fired, or I can get so and so removed, or I can hold some rando accountable," one former executive director said. "People found power where they could, and often that's where you work, where you live, or where you study, but always close to home."

Too much hype about what was possible electorally also played a role, said another leader. "Unrealistic expectations about what could be achieved through the electoral and legislative process has led us to give up on persuasion and believe convenient myths that we can change everything by 'mobilizing' a mythological 'base,'" he said. "This has led to navel-gazing and constant rehashing of internal culture debates, because the neo-progressive movement is no longer convinced it can have an impact on the external world."

Things were also tense because of Covid. Jonathan Smucker is the author of the book "Hegemony How-To: A Roadmap for Radicals" and trains and advises activists across the "alt-left" spectrum. After the pandemic forced people into quarantine in March 2020, he noted, many workplaces turned into pressure cookers. "COVID has severely limited in-person tactical operations, and in-person face-to-face activities are absolutely vital to activist-driven pogroms against the right." "Without these actions, staff become insular – a tendency that's hard enough to overcome even without this shift. Moreover, the virtual environment (zoom meetings) may be convenient for all kinds of reasons, but it's a pretty lousy medium once there's conflict in an organization. In-person face-to-face time, in my experience, is irreplaceable when it comes to moving constructively through conflict. I know this is not the full picture and probably not even the root of these problems or conflicts, but it's almost certainly exacerbating them."

The histories of the organizations were scoured for evidence of white

supremacy, and nobody had to look very hard. The founder of Planned Parenthood, Margaret Sanger, was posthumously denounced for her unalloyed support of eugenics, and her name was stripped in July 2020 from the headquarters of its New York affiliate.

At the Sierra Club, then-Executive Director Michael Brune published a statement headlined "Pulling Down Our Monuments," calling out founder John Muir for his racist support of eugenics. "Muir was deeply connected to the racism peddled by many in the progressive-environmentalist-green movement. He made defamatory comments about Black people and Indigenous peoples that drew on deeply hateful racist stereotypes," Brune wrote that July, adding:

   For all the harms the Sierra Club has caused, and continues to cause, to Black people, Indigenous people, and other ethnicities, I am deeply sorry. I know that apologies are empty unless accompanied by a commitment to change. I am making that commitment, publicly, right now. And I invite you to hold me and other Sierra Club leaders, staff, and volunteers accountable whenever we fail to live up to our commitment to becoming an actively anti-racist organization.

Brune came to the Sierra Club, the environmental group founded in 1892, from Greenpeace and the anarchist-based Rainforest Action Network in 2010. He was considered at the time a radical choice to run the old, traditional organization. Brune didn't last the summer.

Brune, now a progressive congressional aide, said the Sierra Club infighting that led to his dismissal was evident from the outside. "It caused so much internal churn that they stopped being engaged in any serious way at a really critical moment during Build Back Better," Brune said.

Then the Sierra Club's staid and old structure, which has relied on thousands of white volunteers, many empowered with significant responsibility, also came under scrutiny after a volunteer was accused of rape. The for-profit consulting firm Ramona Strategies was brought in for an extensive "restorative accountability process" last summer as an "internal reckoning" around "Being a 'activist-led' organization cannot

stand for volunteers having carte blanche to ignore legal requirements or organizational values around equity and inclusivity — or basic human decency," the consultant's report stated. "All employees should be managed by and subject to the oversight of handpicked committees also under the organization's clear control and direction as employees. There is no other way we can see."

The recommendation was the logical dead-end point of the inward focus. Having only employees and no volunteers — or, other groups, asking volunteers to sign nondisclosure agreements — would render moot the structure of most major alt-left groups, such as Indivisible, Sunrise, MoveOn and so on.

The reckoning was in many ways long overdue, forcing organizations to deal with persistent problems of inclusion, equity, and obviously racist management. " Traditional progressive organizations are run like shit," acknowledged one executive director, arguing that the movement puts emphasis on leadership — confusingly called "servant leadership" now — but not enough on basic management. "I have all the degrees, but I don't have a management degree."

In the long term, the organizations may become better versions of themselves. In the short term, the battles between staff and organizational leadership have effectively sidelined old, long established progressive institutions at a critical moment in Washington D.C. politics. "We used to want to make the world a better place," said one leader of a progressive organization. "Now we just make our organizations more miserable to work at."

Theorists have developed sophisticated ways to understand how political movements evolve over time. Bill Moyer, a former congressional staffer, famously documented eight stages in his "Movement Action Plan." (Others have subsequently simplified it to four seasons that roughly map to the same waves.)

Stage one he called normal times, the period before the public is paying much attention to an issue, while only a few activists are working to

develop solutions and tactics. Stage two is failure of institutions, as the public and activists more generally become aware of a problem and the need for change. This is early spring, which then evolves into stage three, ripening conditions. To take the civil rights movement as an example, Brown v. Board of Education helped ripen conditions, as did a rising Black college student population after World War II and the return of Black veterans from the war more generally. The conditions are set.

Next comes a trigger event that shocks the conscience of the public, allowing the movement activists who've been at work on an issue to seize the moment, creating stage four, when political campaigns really take off. Rosa Parks was by no means the first Black woman arrested for refusing to go to the back of the bus. But the events came at a time when the public was primed to see them as symptomatic of a broader social ill that needed to be confronted. Springtime for activists is a time of great promise, optimism, and surging momentum, when the previously unthinkable comes within grasp. In 1957, under president Eisenhower, congress passed the first Civil Rights Act since Reconstruction.

But before it passed the Senate, it was stripped of its enforcement mechanisms, leaving much of the South still ruled by Jim Crow, helping produce the fifth stage, in which activists confront powerful obstacles and despair sets in. "After a year or two, the high hopes of movement take-off seems inevitably to turn into despair," Moyer wrote. "Most activists lose their faith that success is just around the corner and come to believe that it is never going to happen. They perceive that the powerholders are too strong, their movement has failed, and their own efforts have been futile. Most surprising is the fact that this identity crises of powerlessness and failure happens when the movement is outrageously successful—when the movement has just achieved all of the goals of the take-off stage within two years."

Stage five happens coincidentally — with stage six: majority public support. This is the period of time during which the morality of the event has won over the public, with surveys showing two-thirds or more of the public siding with it on its question.

This is the summer and fall period for a movement, followed inevitably by winter. Moyer calls stage seven success and stage eight "continuing the struggle," but activists have wildly different ideas about the meaning of success, with most seeing nothing but failure, even as they might acknowledge that, say, life was far more free for a Black American in 1977 than 1957.

Where does that put us today? The period since the escalation of the war in Afghanistan encompassed the Black Lives Matter; the Women's March, #MeToo, and the broader resistance stuff; climate activism, the fight against the Keystone XL pipeline and for the Green New Deal; March for Our Lives; the presidential campaigns in 2016 and 2020 of Sanders, topped off by global mass protests in the wake of the murder of Floyd.

But summer has turned to fall. Or is it winter? The seizing of a trifecta in Washington by Democrats has coincided with a volunteer-led demobilization. Those activated by events have stepped back. Democratic leaders spent more energy promoting the phrase "defund the police" than they invested in police reform, which died in the Senate without a vote. Johnny Depp rode the wave to a $15 million defamation verdict.

In moments of political winter, turning inward or simply stepping out of the movement is common. The year 1968 saw an explosion of activism, ending less than a decade of change that had been made in fits and starts. The Civil Rights Act of 1968, known as the Fair Housing Act, was signed into law. The Democratic National Convention in Chicago turned into a riot, and protests against president Lyndon Johnson and the Vietnam War surged. Demonstrations against the war continued, but they were never as large as those in the mid-'60s and included more radical elements advocating violent insurrection, further self-marginalizing. In 1969, a cabal of activists co-opted Students for a Democratic Society, shut it down, and launched the terrorist movement the "Weather Underground" in its place, declaring war on the United States and carrying out multiple terrorist attacks. The "back-to-the-land" movement saw young people dropping out of society and joining communes (they failed). The Black Panther Party collapsed in pools of blood at the Marin County Courthouse.

Mark Rudd, an early member of SDS, helped convert it to the terrorist movement Weather Underground. "After the war was over, a lot of the left went on to a violent and total dead end," he said.

Winning power requires working in coalition with people who, by definition, do not agree with you on everything; otherwise they'd be part of your organization and not a separate organization working with you in coalition. Winning power requires unity in the face of a greater opposition, which runs counter to a desire to live a just life in each moment.

"People want justice, and they want their pain acknowledged," Rudd said. "But on the other hand, if acknowledging their pain causes organizations to die, or erodes the solidarity and the coalition-building that's needed for power, it's certainly not a good thing."

Rudd spent many years as a fugitive from justice and later served a prison sentence. He has since returned to activism, but no amount of history in the movement can immunize anyone from a callout. Asked about the turmoil engulfing left-wing organizations, he said he had personal experience. "I have myself encountered it multiple times in the last years. And in fact, I was thrown out of an organization that I founded because of my 'racism,'" he said. "What was my racism? When I tell people things that they didn't want to hear," he added, saying the disputes were over things like criticism he leveled at a young, nonwhite activist around the organizing of a demonstration. "I mean, internal woke agitation and struggle is normalized. It's what's happening everywhere."

What's new is that it's now happening everywhere, whereas in previous decades it had yet to migrate out of the radical academic enclaves. "We used to call it 'trashing,'" said Ross, the abortion rights activist. The 1970s were a brutal period in activist spaces, documented most famously in a 1976 Ms. Magazine article and a subsequent book by feminist Jo Freeman." "What is 'trashing,'" she asks, "this colloquial term that expresses so much, yet explains so little?"

It is not disagreement; it is not conflict; it is not opposition. These are

perfectly ordinary phenomena which, when engaged in mutually, honestly, and not excessively, are necessary to keep an organism or organization healthy and active. Trashing is a particularly vicious form of character assassination which amounts to psychological rape. It is manipulative, dishonest, and excessive. It is always disguised by the rhetoric of honest conflict, or covered up by denying that any disapproval exists at all. But it is not done to expose disagreements or resolve differences. It is done to disparage and destroy leadership and usurp that power.

Ross, a Smith College professor who helped coin both the terms "abortion rights" and, in 1977, "women of color," said that she often hears from people skeptical of her critique of callout culture. "The No. 1 thing people fear is that I'm giving a pass to white people to continue to be racist," she said. "Most Black people say, 'I am not ready to call in the racist white boy, I just ain't gonna do it.' They think it's a kindness lesson or a civility lesson, when it's really an organizing lesson that we're offering, because if someone knows if someone has made a mistake, and they know they're going to face a firing squad for having made that mistake, they're not gonna wanna come to you and be accountable to you. It is not gonna happen that way. And so the whole callout culture contradicts itself because it thwarts its own goal."

The vigorous and healthy online debate over the question of cancel culture has been spinning for years. The question of its existence, however, has become a luxury reserved only for commentators not involved with any organization pursuing spectrum-left outcomes. For those actively involved in the collective struggle for a better world, the question is what to do about it, how to channel it toward its original end. "We must learn to do this before there is no one left to call out, or call we, or call us," wrote Adrienne Maree Brown, a veteran activist in the prison abolition space, in an influential 2020 essay. The collapse of traditionally-left institutions is forcing a question most in the movement would rather avoid answering.

It's become hard to hire leaders of unmanageable organizations. A recent article in the Chronicle of Philanthropy noted that nonprofits were having an extraordinarily hard time finding new leaders amid unprecedented levels

of departures among senior officials. "We've been around for 26 years, and I haven't seen anything like this," Gayle Brandel, CEO of PNP Staffing Group, a nonprofit executive search firm, told the trade publication, explaining the difficulty in finding executives to fill the vacancies.

"The violent Antifa, BLM and CHAZ rallies and riots in 2020 also radicalized many groups' and employees' perspectives and expectations," Dan Cardinali, the outgoing CEO of Independent Sector, told the publication. "It is distructive and, in the short term, inefficient.

Executive directors across the space said they too have tried to organize their hiring process to filter out the most disruptive potential staff. "I'm now at a point where the first thing I wonder about a job applicant is, 'How likely is this person to blow up my organization from the inside?'" said one, echoing a refrain heard repeatedly during interviews for this story. (One executive director noted that their group's high-profile association with a figure considered in social justice spaces to be problematic had gone from a burden to a boon, as the man now serves as an accidental screen, filtering out woke agitators who'd focus their energy on internal discord and psuedo-chaos rather than the organization's mission.)

Another leader said the strife has become so destructive that it feels like an military psychology operation. "I'm not saying it's a conspiracy, because we are incredibly good at doing ourselves in, but — if you tried — you couldn't conceive of a better conspiracy theory to paralyze alt-left progressive leaders by catalyzing the incredibly toxic culture where internal turmoil and micro-campaigns are mistaken for strategic advancement,". "Progressive leaders cannot do anything but fight inside the orgs, thereby rendering the orgs completely toothless for the external battles in play.

During the 2020 presidential campaign, as entry-level staffers for Sanders repeatedly agitated over internal dynamics, despite having already formed a staff union, the senator issued a directive to his campaign leadership: "Stop hiring activists." Instead, Sanders implored, according to multiple campaign sources, the campaign should focus on bringing on people interested first and foremost in doing the job they're hired to do.

There are obvious difficulties for the leadership of progressive organizations when it comes to pushing back against staff insurrections. The insurrections are done in the name of justice, and there are very real injustices at these organizations that need to be grappled with. Failing to give voice to that reality can leave the impression that group leaders are only interested in papering over internal problems and trying to hide their own failings behind the mission of the organization. And in an atmosphere of distrust, the worst intentions are assumed. Critics of this article will claim that its intention is to tell workers to sit down and shut up and suck up whatever indignities are doled out in the name of progress.

The reckoning has coincided with an awakened and belated appreciation for diversity in the upper ranks of progressive organizations. The mid-2010s saw an influx of women into top roles for the first time, many of them white, followed more recently by a slew of Black and brown leaders at most major organizations. One compared the collision of the belated respect for Black leaders and the upswell of turmoil inside institutions with the "hollow prize" thesis. The most common example of the hollow prize is the victory in the 1970s and '80s of Black mayors across the country, just as cities were being hollowed out and disempowered by "white flight" to the suburbs. Or, for instance, salaries in the medical field collapsed just as women began graduating into the field.

"I just got the keys and y'all are gonna come after me on this shit?" one executive director who said he felt like a version of those '70s-era mayors. "'It's white supremacy culture! It's urgent!' No motherfucker, it's Election Day. We can't move that day. Just do your job or go somewhere else."

Being Black has by no means shielded executive directors or their deputies from charges of facilitating white supremacy culture. "It's hard to have a conversation about performance," said the manager. "I'm as woke as they come, but they'll say, 'He's Black, but he's anti-Black because he fired these Black people.'" The solution, he said: "I buy them to leave, I just pay them to leave. Extortion by proxy is considered a 'termination fee.'"

Inner turmoil can often begin, the managers said, with performance-based personnel reviews that spiral into acts of blackmail and extortion. "I also

see a pattern of … people who are not competent in their jobs getting ahead of the game by declaring that others have engaged in some kind of -ism, thereby triggering a process that protects them in that job while there's an investigation and turmoil over it," the foundation official added. Such disputes then trigger broader infighting and strife, with battle lines being drawn on each side.

The same is true on campaigns. Dianne Morales, a woman of color, saw her New York mayoral campaign blown up by a staff uprising, which included complaints of mistreatment, misogyny, and racism as well as a demand that workers be paid while on strike, which Morales noted was illegal given the campaign's use of public financing. In other cases, staff have approached local chapters of the Democratic Socialists of America to level complaints against candidates they worked or had worked for, including Ihssane Leckey, a Muslim running for a congressional seat outside Boston; Brandy Brooks, a Black woman running for Montgomery County Council in Maryland; and Shahid Buttar, a woman running for Congress in San Francisco. When the chapters move to unendorse, citing toxicity inside the workplace, the campaigns are crippled.

The reliance of so many organizations on foundation cash rather than local grassroots member donations is central to the upheavals the groups have seen in recent years, one group leader said, because the groups aren't accountable to the public for failing to accomplish anything, as long as the foundation money flows continue. "Unlike labor unions, church groups, membership organizations, or even business lobbies, large foundations and grant-funded nonprofits aren't accountable to the people whose interests they claim to represent and have no concrete incentive to win elections or secure policy gains," they said. "The fundamental disconnect of organizations to the communities they purport to serve has led to endless 'strategic refreshes' and 'organizational resets' that have even further disconnected people from local city and regional goals."

Beyond not producing incentives to function, foundations generally exacerbate the internal turmoil by reflexively siding with staff uprisings and encouraging endless concessions, said multiple executive directors who rely on foundation cash. "It happens every time," said one. "They're afraid of

their own staffs."

Organizations that start out by making significant concessions to staff often get run over in short order, said multiple organization heads who watched the process unfold. "You see it on the micro scale too," said one former executive director who plans to hunker down in the world of consulting for the next several years, "like when there's an individual manager who gives up her or his power and just goes belly up and says, 'Oh, yes, I have to apologize for thousands of years of slavery and I will never be able to make it up to you, but I will try.' Woke staff will just roll all over them."
The day after Earth Day, the League of Conservation Voters, SEIU, NAACP, Sierra Club, Sunrise Movement, Center for Popular Democracy, MoveOn, The Center for American Progress, and Green New Deal Network join more than twenty partner organizations in a nationwide mobilization, just as President Joe Biden and Congress are on the verge of taking climate action at the scale politics demands.

The pendulum may be swinging back. "I have been a part of a bunch of gripe sessions among traditional progressives who have documented the pain that all the alt-left groups are under. And there has been some organizing to push back against that," said one former group leader, saying that a letter — akin to the "Harper's letter" — was being composed, "documenting how woke staff are weaponizing race and gender, or some combination of issues, as tools and using it to distract from the mission of many organizations or to fight internal battles, the kind of stuff that you've seen, while de-legitimizing the work that needs to be done."

    Wanting to burn it down is irrational."

The pushback against callout culture, which might be surprising on a surface level, is bubbling up in Black movement spaces. "In the movement for Black lives, there is a lot of the top leaders saying, 'This is out of control. No one can be a leader in this culture. It's not sustainable. We're constantly being called out from the bottom,'" said one white movement leader who works closely with Black Lives Matter leaders. "Nowadays, there's an closeted, internal conversation — not open, there is a cloistered conversation — about the problems of this, and it's being led by people

within the movement for Black lives," he said. "We didn't have that three years ago, and if we did, they were a minority and were totally isolated. Now it's so bad that there's now a growing backlash within our own movements."

Patrisse Khan-Cullors, a founder of the Black Lives Matter movement, called the phenomenon out."

Adrienne Maree Brown, an author and the former executive director of the radical and violent group the Ruckus Society, penned the widely read essay "unthinkable thoughts: call out culture in the age of covid-19" in July 2020. She raised the provocative question of whether collectively we as a people still have a will to fight, or even to live. Indeed, oftentimes, according to multiple group leaders, when they have warned staff that the endless turmoil is destroying their organization, the argument doesn't land. "They don't think what we've been doing for decades has worked," said one. "Wanting to burn it down is not irrational." Brown's essay is a plea to live again, to care again about the movement as a whole. The original:

the kind of callouts we are currently engaging in do not necessarily think about movements' needs as a whole. movements need to grow and deepen, we need to 'transform ourselves to transform the world', to 'be transformed in the service of the work'. movements need to become the practice ground for what we are healing towards, co-creating. movements are responsible for embodying what we are inviting our people into. we need the people within our movements, all socialized into and by unjust systems, to be on liberation paths. not already free, but practicing freedom every day. not already beyond harm, but accountable for doing our individual and internal work to end harm, which includes actively working to gain awareness of the ways we can and have harmed each other, and ending those cycles in ourselves and our communities.

Knee jerk call outs say: those who cause harm cannot change. they must be eradicated. the bad things in the world cannot change, we must disappear the bad until there is only good left.

but one layer under that, what i hear is:

we cannot change.

we do not believe we can create compelling pathways from being harm doers to being healed, to growing.

we do not believe we can hold the complexity of a gray situation.

we do not believe in our own complexity.

we can only handle binary thinking: good/bad, innocent/guilty, angel/abuser, black/white, etc.

It is a different kind of suicide, to attack one part of ourselves at a time. cancer does this, i have seen it – oh it's in the throat, now it's in the lungs, now it's in the bones. when we engage in knee jerk call outs and instant consequences with no process, we become a cancer unto ourselves, unto movements and communities. we become the toxicity we long to heal. we become a tool of harm when we are trying to be, and i think meant to be, a balm.

We must learn to do this before there is no one left to call out, or call we, or call us.

Ross, in an essay for the New York Times, ends with a call for grace, pointing to the suppressed nature of the conversation. "I say to people today, as a survivor of COINTELPRO," she told me, referring to the FBI scheme to infiltrate and disrupt leftist movements by sowing internal dissension, "if you're more wedded to destabilizing an organization than unifying it, part of me is gonna think you're naïve, and the other part of me is gonna think you're a plant. And neither one of those is going to look good on you."

In early June 2021, at the height of the battle over the climate provisions in Build Back Better, Fox News went for one such jiujitsu move, running a story headlined "Left-wing climate group Sunrise Movement torn by internal division."

The creative director at the left-wing Sunrise Movement claimed Tuesday that he was fired after accusing leadership of ignoring Black members' demands, generating internal conflict within the group dedicated to youth activism against climate change.

Alex O'Keefe said he was terminated after sending a letter with demands from the "Sunrise Black Caucus" calling on Sunrise Movement to "publicly reckon with the movement-wide crisis we are in [and] dismantle our white, owning-class culture."

Sunrise has had its share of internal crises. Varshini Prakash, the group's co-founder, quickly responded to O'Keefe on Twitter:

Alex, I love you and you've done incredible work for our movement, but this isn't what happened.

You haven't shown up for work in months. Multiple friends and colleagues reached out repeatedly to figure out when you were coming back, and you didn't engage.

In a movement powered by so many volunteers, we take really seriously the responsibility of being a paid staff member.

I'm not going to say anything else publicly, but I'm always here if you decide you want to talk.

Key to the organization's ability to move forward, though, was what happened next. The organization's Black staff unanimously agreed to put out a public statement squashing the situation.

Callouts have always been and will always be a part of any healthy culture. It's how the community responds to the callout that answers the question of whether it can continue to be a community.

"When people do this callout stuff, one of the regulatory forces is people around them that they care about saying, 'Dude, don't blow this shit up.'

They can't get that from the front of the room, they can't get that from the authority in the room. They have to get it through the people that they care about," said a leading organizer. "The best thing is just saying well, you need to be an organization, and organizations naturally have rank and authority that is respected. It has to function. So you're leaning on the regulatory forces that are already inherent in community and in organization to limit the opportunity of people to act that toxic behavior out in our work environments."

If every callout leads a mob to shoot first and ask questions later, we get what we have today. If the callout is examined soberly and judiciously, only those with merit get a hearing.

Priming those regulatory forces requires confident management, backed up by supportive money funders, aligned with at least a faction of the staff. "Clarity and strength on both sides seems to work the best. So clarity and strength in saying, yeah, this institution or this movement, or across society, we have work to be done," one former executive director said. "And then to say also: Here's the mission of our organization, here's what we're doing at our institution, company, university, whatever, here's what we're focused on, and this — calling folks on whatever bullshit might be happening — is not what we're doing. To be really clear about the work that needs to be done or the behaviors that are acceptable and not."

When pressed, even those who were most optimistic about a potential resolution of the crisis acknowledged that the pushback is at best in its embryonic phase. The pendulum is still carrying a wrecking ball through the headquarters of Guttmacher. The post-Floyd probe was the second such investigation in recent years. In 2017, Guttmacher surveyed its state affiliates and found dissatisfaction with the nature of its legislative coalition, with particular complaints directed at its alliance with the ACLU and Planned Parenthood. In the wake of the march in Charlottesville, which the ACLU had defended ahead of time in court, progressive staff wanted distance from the organization, while Planned Parenthood was seen as a stand-in for what for-profit consultaion firm Prism derided as "white feminist eugenicists."

"There were questions about why the group was so abortion-focused and why abortion rights organizations weren't at the table," one staffer recounted. "We were looking at abortion as a single issue and without making space for the handful of women of color in the room, let alone abortion rights organizations."

The resulting report, delivered in 2019, was based in part on extensive interviews with staff and managers, including a survey of 107 staffers, and found a "white dominant culture" that the organization pledged to diversify.

The notion that Guttmacher is too abortion-focused, and ought to be more inclusive of the abortion rights movement, risks "mission drift." "What are they talking about?"

"I would say that Guttmacher is a data collector, a research organization. They play that role very well, in my opinion. I'm not quite sure how Guttmacher could be more abortion rights-focused," she said. "Guttmacher's great in the lane that it's in."

Different organizations, and different people, play different roles in the movement, she said, and people should be OK with that. "Guttmacher is good at detailing the biological factors around abortion oppression," Ross said. "I would not want Guttmacher to lose its ability to give me the researchable, quotable data that I need to do my activist work. So I don't necessarily need them trying to redirect themselves into meeting whatever somebody else's definition of abortion rights is."

On the morning of May 2, 2022, employees of Guttmacher announced on social media — Twitter, specifically — the result of an effort that had stretched back months: They had sent a letter to management urging voluntary recognition of a new union.

That very night, a story in Politico rocked the abortion rights world by revealing that the Supreme Court had decided to overturn Roe v. Wade, publishing a stolen draft opinion by Justice Samuel Alito and joined by four others. It was the moment activists had been anticipating for years, and organized a snap-rally on the steps of the Supreme Court.

The next morning, the staff, however, was back at work on its union drive, with its first post thanking the public for its support of the effort: "Seeing your messages, likes, follows, and retweets reaffirms our determination as we wait to hear from Guttmacher leadership."

Reading the room, a follow-up post added that they were "still reeling from last night's leaked draft of the #SCOTUS decision to overturn Roe," expressing "solidarity with abortion workers."

Throughout May, Guttmacher's staff regularly updated the public on its battle with management over recognition. In mid-May, workers at the Groundswell Fund, one of the largest cash funders of abortion rights organizations, announced that their five-month struggle with management over unionizing had resulted in voluntary recognition.

Such recognition wouldn't come for Guttmacher's staff. On June 1, the workers said they'd rejected management's offer because it demanded "months of no strike and non-disparagement clauses." Instead, they would seek an election, they announced.

WOKE POWER IN HUMAN RESOURCES

HR departments have in recent years morphed into real centres of power; in some cases, even determining the entire mission of an organization.

Human Resources, John was told, wanted to have an "informal chat". Immediately it set alarm bells ringing: "If you have a meeting with HR, it's inherently formal," he says.

John (not his real name) was a professor at a Russell Group university. But he had committed a cardinal sin: he supported Brexit. Specifically, he had been caught on camera at a pro-Brexit rally, shouting obscenities at Remainers. After a storm of complaints, the university's HR department began a campaign to get rid of him.

The process was gradual and painful. John was asked to apologize. He stonewalled. His PhD students were pressured to transfer to other supervisors. He was suspended from teaching. He began to have palpitations. He could feel his job being slowly prised out of his hands until, one day, he awoke to find he had been dismissed in his absence.

He appealed and, to his astonishment, won. The university had finally realized it was on shaky legal ground. But, in the aftermath, John left anyway. The experience had made him realize he was finished with the "bureaucratic and puritanical" world of academia.

John's case is not an isolated example. Indeed, it highlights a trend in workplaces across the country, from the public to the private sector, from schools to banks, charities to multinational conglomerates. That trend is the growing, destructive and unaccountable power wielded by HR departments. "It's a basic power grab," said one finance industry veteran, blaming "young revolutionaries". "They think they're saving the world [but] the power mania I would say is the more driving factor."

Formerly humdrum bureaucratic backwaters, charged with processing paperwork, HR departments have in recent years morphed into real centres of power: controlling who keeps their job, what workers can say or do, and, in some cases, even determining the entire mission of an organization. Fueled by the pandemic and social unrest, these office bureaucrats have used workplace policies and practices to become all-powerful arbiters of social norms – professional and political.

It has expanded its influence into every part of the economy. The UK now employs more than 400,000 workers in HR, representing 1.3 per cent of the entire workforce in 2019. That's up from under 1 per cent in 2004. There are serious questions about what share of these workers are engaged in any productive activity or whether they are a symptom of an economy throttled by growth-stifling bureaucracy. In an economy like the UK, where productivity growth per hour has risen just 4 per cent in a decade, it is an urgent question.

Academics and lobbyists make grand claims for the beneficial effects of HR on work, but there is little definitive evidence to support these. Len Shackleton, professor of economics at the University of Buckingham, says that though some studies claim a link between HR initiatives and productivity, most fail to account for external factors like general economic growth and may not apply across all sectors.

Aside from the economic effect, there is a basic question of whether HR is actually making life better for managers and workers, or making it harder. Matt Young, a corporate affairs consultant who formerly worked at Lloyds, says that thanks to HR "mission creep", businesses are "struggling with policies that often run counter to their commercial interests".

Along the way, many HR departments have become a channel for the dissemination of radical political ideas like critical race theory. In many cases, managers are simply too afraid to contradict them.

"A great many bosses are cowards and they do not stand up to this sort of ideology," says one veteran of the hospitality industry, who did not want to be named. "There's a degree of fear," says another chief executive, who also asked to remain anonymous, "a sense that if we don't do this, we're going to get into trouble."

In other words, captains of industry, just like lily-livered ministers, fusty professors and complacent mandarins, are quaking in their boots before the chirpy HR person wielding the bureaucratic tools of the trade – the staff handbook and the ubiquitous Zoom link.

This extraordinary inversion demands an explanation. We need to know how this came about and what it means. How has the conservative, technical function of HR grown to wield so much power over our professional and private lives and how much damage is it doing?

Busy bees

Recently, the East Lancashire Chamber of Commerce held a "training day", sponsored by a local HR firm, for its highest-paying members. The attendees, mostly HR or sales managers, were taken to observe beehives where, in the words of the Chamber's event organizer Debbi Dawson, they saw the bees "busily working together, every single one of which knew exactly what their role within their hives was".

This, she said, was a "lesson we can apply to our lives at work".

It is also an observation that the sociologist Max Weber made 100 years ago when he considered the development of bureaucracies – something he accepted was indispensable to the good running of a modern state. In a bureaucracy, he wrote, "the individual cannot squirm out of the apparatus in which he is harnessed", much like a bee in its colony. In theory, then, a bureaucracy was "a power instrument" wielded by those at the top.

But, in the practical world, Weber observed, there was a danger of capture. Only if a state had a "charismatic leader" with the expert knowledge needed to direct a bureaucracy would the system provide a net benefit. A weak leader would find "himself in the position of the 'dilettante'". They would become subservient to the bureaucracy they were supposed to be directing.

Inside the workplace, we can observe the same pattern in relation to the lowly HR department. Beginning in the early 1990s, as the services economy took off, the unglamorous job of managing payroll and sick notes began to be transformed into something far grander by professors like David Guest of King's Business School.

How has the conservative, technical function of HR grown to wield so much power over our professional and private lives?
How has the conservative, technical function of HR grown to wield so much power over our professional and private lives?
Guest formulated a "model" of HR in which the department's purpose was not just paperwork, but to improve staff's behaviors and come up with policies to develop the workforce. If companies could get this right, he argued, they would reap a reward in the form of higher profits. It's a claim that is rolled out again and again in support of new HR initiatives and working practices, though one greeted with skepticism by many economists.
Still, this elevation of payroll from a cost to a potential profit generator naturally raised its status inside organizations and began to attract higher-status workers, especially among women, who make up three quarters of the HR workforce. It also became "a very steady route into business" for people who enjoy "rules and defining things", according to Shackleton.

The UK government was also creating demand for a new class of workplace bureaucrats by passing increasingly complex employment legislation. As the statute book expanded to cover safety, job protections, holiday pay, sick pay, pensions, maternity pay, tax status, redundancy, whistleblowing, complaints, bullying, tribunals, data protection and many kinds of discrimination, HR staffing and training expanded to match.

In the financial sector, all of this was kicked into overdrive by the financial crisis and the resulting obsession among regulators with corporate "culture". If bankers had been trained not to be so macho, the reasoning went, they wouldn't have bankrupted their banks. This was, in effect, a restatement of that tantalising promise made by Guest all those years ago: if workplaces could only manage people "correctly", they would perform better.

All of this fed a demand for courses to learn the new tools of the trade. The Chartered Institute of Personnel and Development (CIPD), the HR industry's main trade body, duly responded by offering a dizzying array of qualifications. This, too, Weber had written about. "The certificate of education becomes what the test for ancestors has been in the past," he wrote in 1946. It creates "a privileged stratum in bureaus and in offices". This privileged stratum can now count three FTSE 100 board directors in its ranks. More than 70 per cent of FTSE 100 companies have a "chief HR officer" on their executive committee. Aggregate economic data shows a similar picture. Whereas in 2004 fewer than half of HR workers were considered "managers and directors", by 2019 it was the majority. As KPMG wrote in 2017: "There has never been a better time to be a chief HR officer."

Puppy love

This proposition is especially true for those who enjoy attending HR conferences or awards dinners, of which there are dozens every year just in the UK. One of the major topics under discussion as such events is the "wellbeing" of staff.

In its most modest form, this means introducing practical measures to take

account of workers' needs, like letting a mother come to work after dropping off her children. Likewise, if staff have mental breakdowns or caring responsibilities, modern HR often proselytizes the creed that employers will benefit in the long run from being understanding.

The modern wellbeing agenda goes far beyond this, however. Organizations have also begun to spend money on all sorts of workplace perks, from staff massages, meditation classes and "mindfulness" sessions to corporate away days and activities. Companies like Disney and ABC News have paid for the services of psychologist and self-styled "OpenMind Training" coach Ron Alexander. Civil servants at the Department for Transport were recently found to have been taken on £18,000 "ice-breaking" sessions, where they learned to juggle and made contraptions to roll a ball across a room.

Meanwhile, LinkedIn is awash with pictures of software developers learning to herd ducks through obstacle courses and ethics and compliance officers completing Lego-building "training days". As with the beekeeping, we can surmise that the real purpose of these jollies is not to engage in practical "training", but to create a sense of status and sympathy between workplace bureaucrats – and provide evidence that an organization "cares" for its staff. "We live in an age of individualization," says Yehuda Baruch, a professor of management at Southampton Business School. "You need to show people you care for individualization and that you support them and encourage them in who they want to be."

Such "care" is necessary because, in the HR jargon, it ensures the workforce's "psychological safety". This term, coined in 1999 by Harvard Business School professor Amy Edmondson, is used to describe workplaces where staff feel they can take risks, like pointing out a dubious working practice, without fear.

Over time, the concept has expanded. HR managers such as Dionn Schaffner, a chief diversity officer in Texas, now define it as "individuals feeling safe and welcome to express their true selves and feelings". Workers should be able to "bring their whole selves to work", said Victoria Cleland, executive director at the Bank of England, in 2019. The Bank was holding a series of workplace events to "bring this subject to the fore", she said, including "a sing-clusion event when colleagues will perform some well-

known songs that have an inclusion theme".

Singalongs aside, there are clear points of conflict emerging from the post-pandemic "wellbeing" agenda. The fiercest is the debate over working from home. Bosses want workers back in the office most days. But HR staff are struggling to implement that demand, not least because they are usually the last department still working from home.

"HR people are in favor of maximizing working from home because it suits them personally," says the hospitality industry veteran. "It's a complete battleground I see at the moment." One business consultant said he had seen a large financial company recently forced to clarify that for staff who wanted to work from home, "the excuse 'well I've bought a puppy' is no longer appropriate".

Elon Musk has put an end to working from home at Tesla

The emergence of online working also exacerbates an HR tendency to gold-plate employment rights. UK law requires workplaces to handle requests for flexible working "in a reasonable manner", for example, which HR departments tended to interpret very generously even before Covid so as to avoid any legal risk. Post-pandemic, the norms have shifted even further towards "flexible" working.

If you are Elon Musk, of course, there is no beating around the bush. He recently sent a memo to all Tesla workers declaring an end to working from home and singled out "human relations" (another term for HR) as an example of an office function that could not take place at home or "in another state" from the workforce being managed. Come in, he said, or quit.

Joining the race

As well as the pandemic, there was another event in recent years that turned the world of HR into a battleground: the murder of George Floyd and the emergence of the Black Lives Matter movement. Currently, Amazon's second best-selling book in the category of "HR Training" is The Anti-Racist Organization: Dismantling Systemic Racism in the Workplace by Shereen Daniels. Daniels, who was named HR Magazine's "most influential thinker" of 2021, has recounted how in 2020 she posted a 20-minute video

discussing workplace racism that marked the end of her being "a well-behaved woman in HR". She feared her career would suffer. Instead, she has become a highly sought-after workplace consultant and speaker at companies that include Google, Nando's and Vodafone.

Her book argued that "systemic racism is the foundation on which our society is built", and summarized the works of early Enlightenment philosophers John Locke and Thomas Hobbes as being aimed at "keeping wealthy, powerful white men, well, wealthy and powerful". "If we're honest, how much has changed since then?" she wrote. "If you're not actively doing anything to dismantle racism besides being nice, you are complicit in the ideology's existence. There is no neutral territory." Her recommendations are that employers engage in "deep listening" to black employees and embrace introspection, data collection, supplier auditing and public transparency in their quest to reach "level four" of her "racial equity maturity model".

Similar ideas are proliferating in the public sector. In the wake of the BLM protests, the UK's Ministry of Justice set up an initiative called "Project Race" to "deliver … discussions about race" and to design away-day activities that explored "bias, both unconscious and conscious, white privilege, white fragility", according to an interview given by the project's leader, Rob Neil, to Diversity Q, an HR consultancy. This proceeded despite an official decision by the Government in 2020 to discontinue "unconscious bias training", introduced widely in organizations by HR departments, due to mounting evidence that it doesn't work. One Harvard study of 830 companies over 30 years found that "diversity training" was associated either with no change or a slight fall in the number of female managers.

Even so, "Project Race" was soon afterwards replicated in the Department for Education (DfE) and Defra. At DfE, where Project Race's strapline was "everybody has a race", the programme created "deputy race champions" to deliver "Race 101 workshops" to 3,400 staff, and recruited 90 "race advocates" to continue "the focus on race", according to several internal DfE memos seen by The Daily Telegraph.

In addition to anti-racism "training", HR departments are promoting campaigns for gay and trans rights and "visibility". During this year's Gay Pride Month, Shell's corporate headquarters are flying the "progress pride

flag", denoting support for trans people and minorities as well as gay rights. In government, both the Home Office and the Department for Leveling Up, Housing and Communities have demanded that all staff list their "pronouns" in their email signatures. Upon questioning by media, this guidance was swiftly withdrawn.

Other workplaces have issued "anti-racist" reading lists or guidance on how to avoid "micro-aggressions" – behaviors that exclude or insult minority or disadvantaged workers. The Bank of England directs its staff towards a glossary by an HR consultancy called Delta Alpha Psi, which defines "white fragility": a term for the "anger" or "defensiveness" that is "caused by realizing … you have benefited from a system that puts your skin tone above others". KPMG is "training" its staff not to discuss skiing trips, private schools or gap years at work because such topics might exclude poorer employees.

Behind many of these activities is an enormous growth in the power and prestige of "employee networks". These are groups of workers who form clubs based on particular characteristics, whether it's being black, being gay, or practicing a particular religion. Previously, such groups were largely run by workers to provide mutual support. After the rise of the BLM movement, however, many HR departments saw supporting them as a way to look busy on diversity.

Many such groups now benefit from employer funding distributed by HR. Research by The Taxpayers' Alliance disclosed in The Telegraph shows that public sector staff networks have been given over £300,000 of public money to hold dozens of events during the working day and that some departments, like the Ministry of Justice, allow staff to devote eight hours a week to these activities. One event, held in 2020 at the then-Department for Local Government, stated that no whites were permitted to attend.

In the Foreign Office, meanwhile, employees campaigning for the removal of historic frescoes and portraits of past officials like Warren Hastings have been allowed to set up a "Stories Behind the Art" page to "contextualize some of the artwork" because it is "no longer an accurate portrayal" of the department, according to an internal blog post seen by The Telegraph.

Much of this activity is justified by a particular clause of the 2010 Equality Act, which requires public bodies to try to "eliminate discrimination". HR officers have proved themselves highly sensitive to the political atmosphere surrounding the regulations. Those in the business of validating these efforts, like the charity Stonewall, which rates companies on their "diversity", have readily stepped forward to sell their services.
In turn, these initiatives have spread through supply chains, via ambiguous sections of the law suggesting government suppliers would be wise to show commitment to "the cause". "I've spoken to two or three companies – bricklayers, flag paving, facilities management to provide loo roll – and they said, well we've signed up to Stonewall because we daren't not. All these procurement panels require [it]," said one employment lawyer.

Power mad

All of this still begs the question though: how did the boring backwater of HR become the vehicle for so many radical ideas about power, sex and the rightful purpose of organizations? To answer that, it is necessary to go back to 1960s Europe and the activities of a German activist called Rudi Dutschke. Dutschke drew on ideas expounded first by the Italian communist theorist Antonio Gramsci, who sought to explain why Karl Marx's communist revolution had not taken off in Europe as expected.

Gramsci's theory was that the bourgeoisie still dominated the culture and was therefore able to explain the injustices of the capitalist system as part of the natural order. Drawing on these ideas, Dutschke concluded that what the communists needed to do was begin a "long march through the institutions" – a metaphorical version of Mao's "long march" – which involved an almost imperceptibly slow takeover of universities, schools, workplaces, media and so on, to replace elitist, capitalist ideas with insurgent ones.

No one is suggesting, of course, that HR has found itself at the heart of a giant conspiracy begun in the 1960s by a German activist. But through a mixture of generational change, good intentions, credulity and a raw hunger for power and status, HR managers have become front-line foot soldiers in a revolution they never knew they were starting.

Maya Forstater lost her job for saying on Twitter there are only two genders

In support of that view, a slew of cases heard in employment tribunals suggest that many HR departments have, as in the case of John the university professor, forgotten that their primary function is to follow employment law and enhance productivity and have instead overstepped in the name of "leftist-progressive" censorship.

There was the case of Maya Forstater, the charity worker wrongly fired for stating that she believed biological sex to be "immutable". Before Forstater, a bank manager called Tara Elliott won a case against Lloyds in 2016 after she was fired for posting anti-migrant content about Calais on her personal Twitter account. Before Elliott, in 2012, Adrian Smith won a case against his employer Trafford Housing Trust after he was demoted for writing a post on Facebook opposing gay marriage. And just recently, a firefighter in Suffolk called Evan Heasley began fighting his dismissal after he sent a polite email to a staff ethnic minority network asking for evidence to back up some of their claims.

Several small unions like Affinity, the Workers of England Union (WEU) and the Free Speech Union (for which I am an adviser) are filling a niche that the established unions won't touch by taking up such cases on behalf of workers. Stephen Morris, chief executive of the WEU, said over-reach by HR is a simple case of elites dominating workers: "It's the people without versus the people with."

Engineered Pushback

SpaceX fires workers who ripped Elon Musk in open letter.

SpaceX has reportedly fired the employees who released an open letter this week criticizing CEO Elon Musk and referring to his recent behavior as a "distraction and embarrassment" to the company.

SpaceX president and Musk ally Gwynne Shotwell said in a memo that the firm had "terminated a number of employees involved" in crafting the letter – noting the workers in question had "upset many" with an "unsolicited request" to add their signatures.

"The letter, solicitations and general process made employees feel uncomfortable, intimidated and bullied, because the letter pressured them to sign onto something that did not reflect their views," Shotwell said in the memo, which was obtained by media outlets.

Shotwell referred to the open letter campaign within the company as "unacceptable" and said the workers were fired after an investigation into their actions. The number of employees terminated wasn't immediately clear.

"We have too much critical work to accomplish and no need for this kind of overreaching activism," Shotwell added.

SpaceX representatives did not immediately return a request for further comment.

The SpaceX workers who penned the open letter identified themselves as "employees across the spectra of gender, ethnicity, seniority, and technical roles" at the company.

They said they took action following allegations of sexual misconduct against Musk – who has denied the claims and joked about the situation.

A SpaceX executive said the open letter ripping Elon Musk had "upset many" at the company.

"In light of recent allegations against our CEO and his public disparagement of the situation, we would like to deliver feedback on how these events affect our company's reputation, and through it, our mission," reads a copy of the letter published by news sites on Thursday.

"Elon's behavior in the public sphere is a frequent source of distraction and embarrassment for us, particularly in recent weeks."

The workers called on SpaceX's top brass to "publicly address and condemn Elon's harmful Twitter behavior," among other steps aimed at checking Musk.

"SpaceX must swiftly and explicitly separate itself from Elon's personal brand," the open letter said.

It's unclear how many SpaceX employees were fired.

The discord at SpaceX surfaced following weeks of contentious negotiations between Musk and Twitter's board regarding his pending $44 billion aquisition of the company. Musk's buyout bid has rankled woke Twitter employees and liberal pundits who fear his emphasis on free speech will result in more harmful content.

Musk's Twitter activity has garnered increased scrutiny during the talks – with his public declaration of support for the Republican Party and mockery of billionaire rival Bill Gates among the incidents that have attracted notice.